

# CLEOPATRA:

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## *New Insights for the Interpretation of Revelation 17*

BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE

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The Whore of Babylon as a graphic scriptural image frequently stirs the imaginations of contemporary readers of the book of Revelation. Christian preachers denouncing some perceived apostasy often use the image for its attention-grabbing effectiveness. But how do we explain the dissonance between the Apocalypse's depiction of an unlikely powerful female prostitute living in luxury and the real-life powerlessness and desperation that characterized the social status of the vast majority of prostitutes at the time Revelation was written, and still does today? Is the author dealing with an exceptional case?<sup>1</sup> The disconnect raises questions concerning the purpose and implications of such imagery. What aspects of culture, recent history, or personal experience might the writer have drawn upon? Building upon previous suggestions as to why such imagery might have been particularly gripping for Revelation's first readers, this paper suggests important new connections to the figure of Cleopatra.

It is argued here that the author critiques the Roman Empire by alluding to his prophetic literary tradition and contemporary coinage, but his most persuasive rhetorical allusion is related to the fact that both he and his readers lived in the post-Cleopatra era of the empire. The author

of the book of Revelation was influenced by depictions of Cleopatra as a whore, which, through Roman historical and literary works, had embedded themselves in the popular culture and historical memory of his day. The figure of Cleopatra provides important new insights into the use of the whore image in Revelation 17.

### **The Apocalypse's Whore**

The book of Revelation dramatically describes the Roman Empire as τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης in a crucial part of the narrative toward the end of the book.<sup>2</sup> Those who have been listening carefully since the book's first phrase—"the revelation of Jesus Christ"—have heard numerous references to the "lamb." Beginning in Chapter 12, the lamb has been challenged by a dragon and the two beasts called forth by the dragon to do its bidding (13:1–10, 11–18). Revelation 17 describes a whore seated on the first of these two beasts:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore (πόρνῆς) who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of

the earth have whored (ἐπόρνευσαν) and with the wine of whose whoring (πορνείας) the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” And he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her whoring (πορνείας); and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of whores (πορνῶν) and of earth’s abominations” (17:1–5).<sup>3</sup>

An angel calls this woman a πόρνη (17:1) from the classical Greek verb πέρνημι (“to put up for sale”), understood in daily usage as a “street walker” or “brothel worker,” sometimes contrasted with ἑταίρα (“companion”). In Greek literature, the ἑταίρα acted as an independent female courtesan, regularly wooed with gifts from a man with whom she had an exclusive relationship.<sup>4</sup> The πόρνη had no such expectations. She was “marked, even defined, by her absolute availability” to all. She worked the streets and brothels where the labor was hers, but the profits were not.<sup>5</sup> While the ἑταίρα received goods, the πόρνη was a “good,” a commodity, not an individual.<sup>6</sup> Given the additional description of the woman in Revelation 17 as having lavish attire and expensive accessories, one might assume that ἑταίρα more accurately reflected her social status. Even John seemed taken aback at the ambiguous vision (17:6, 7).<sup>7</sup> This woman surely does not remind us of the desperate women who inhabit the dimly lit shop fronts of inner-city, red-light districts; women who look more like Fantine, the poor young woman in *Les Misérables* who, having exhausted all other options and in order to care for the child she loves, descends into prostitution.<sup>8</sup>

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Rebecca Flemming asserts that by the time of the Roman Empire, the Greek words πόρνη and ἑταίρα were “used almost interchangeably.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the idea of an independent, high-priced courtesan had always and only been a feature of fiction. But, because of its availability at least in literature, the choice of πόρνη for the woman of Revelation 17 would have emphasized her commodity status and numerous sexual partners.<sup>10</sup>

So, the perplexing imagery created a dissonance. Was she a confident courtesan on yet another literary page, or an ever-available brothel worker? Was she both? Was she something else altogether? Jennifer Glancy and Stephen Moore conclude that she was not typical of either.<sup>11</sup> How would John’s readers then have understood the perplexing

whore of the Apocalypse? A response must carefully consider first-century prostitution and the absolute vulnerability of the πόρνη as a slave.<sup>12</sup>

### First-Century Slavery and Prostitution

In the first century, to be a πόρνη was in fact to be in the worst kind of slavery. Ordinary slavery was bad enough.<sup>13</sup> The Greek word for “body” (σῶμα) was considered a synonym for “slave.”<sup>14</sup> Slaves lacked control over their own bodies.<sup>15</sup> Marked with tattoos, their bodies were willed to others at the death of their master, along with other property. The bodies of slaves were used for work, pleasure, punishment, or abuse.

An abundance of data underscores the first-century status of prostitutes as slaves. Whether born into slavery or placed there by a family member, the law “enabled women to be forcibly prostituted, to have their bodies repeatedly sold under them—their owner being the one who gained, as all monies legally accrued to him and from which he provided her livelihood as he chose.”<sup>16</sup> A πόρνη was typically forced to work in a filthy brothel, often standing naked and exposed, attracting clients of low

social status where the price for sex might equal a loaf of bread.<sup>17</sup> Such brothels were found throughout the cities of the empire.

This particular form of slavery was so distasteful that a sympathetic slave owner could make a covenant with a slave buyer, guaranteeing that his slaves would not be forced into prostitution.<sup>18</sup> But there was always a cheap supply of female slave-prostitutes. The exposing and abandoning of children were common practice.

Given the profusion and distribution of sex workers in Roman cities, it seems reasonable to us to suppose that the term *πόρνη* would have conjured up first and foremost in the minds of the urban Christians addressed in Revelation a certain category of flesh-and-blood person that one encountered with considerable frequency in the streets, a fixture of the urban landscape, as opposed to a figure of high literature, or a literary or philosophical *topos*, or a scriptural type.<sup>19</sup>

A reader of Revelation 17, therefore, had to reconcile the daily image of the *πόρνη* seen standing in the entryway to the local brothel with a *πόρνη*-queen described as seated on a throne (17:9, 15; 18:7). Such a powerful, wealthy, and oppressive *πόρνη* definitely did not reflect prostitution in the first century. Elite women did not have sex with multiple partners, and brothel women were anything but powerful. So, why does the author of Revelation use such imagery?<sup>20</sup> Given the prevalence of prostitution, the sexual solicitation part of the scene would not provoke shock. Since prostitution was socially acceptable (better a man goes to the brothel to take care of his lusts than to another man's wife), the dissonance with the "great whore" was much less about sex and much more about power.

When she controlled goods and services rather than acted like the slave she was, her clients got nervous. This scene was provocative precisely because this *πόρνη* was powerful and of equal status to her clients. But what made the scene comprehensible? Several explanatory scenarios are suggested.

### The Woman/City *Topos*

Ancient literature, including the Hebrew prophetic tradition, used the imagery of a woman to personify a city. "The use of a female image was suggested perhaps by the secure, encircling character of a city's walls, which would symbolize the womb or a mother's protective arms."<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 66:7–13 powerfully illustrates that this concept of Zion birthing, nursing, and nurturing her children became a metaphor for God: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you" (Isa. 66:13). Occasionally, the prophets also used the woman/city *topos* to depict an enemy city's ultimate defeat. Jeremiah states of Babylon's demise, "your mother shall be utterly shamed, and she who bore you shall be disgraced."<sup>22</sup>

Although a likely candidate, Babylon was not designated a city-whore in the literature of the Hebrew prophets. Neither Isaiah's outrage at Babylon's arrogance nor Jeremiah's heartbreak at Babylon's cruelty adopted such language. Instead, the whore imagery was most often used to describe God's own people in language that justified God's judgment on them. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza refers to the "conventional metaphor" where whoring meant idolatry.<sup>23</sup> In these examples, the female role was played by the idolatrous and unfaithful people of God who were admonished by the prophet to "stop playing the whore!"

The only two enemy cities referred to in this way within the Hebrew prophetic tradition were Nineveh

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(Nah. 3:4) and Tyre (Isa. 23:17; Ezek. 26–28). Richard Bauckham suggests that John,

quite deliberately fashioned a prophetic oracle against Rome which gathers up all that his prophetic predecessors had pronounced against the two cities of Babylon and Tyre. If Babylon gave Rome its name in John's oracle, it is probably Tyre that supplied the image of the harlot for Rome.<sup>24</sup>

In Israel's prophetic tradition, Babylon was the nation that acted arrogantly against God and violently oppressed Israel, destroying its temple and exiling its people. In short, Babylon acted "beast-like." Thus "Babylon" is used by John to describe the beast-city that acted similarly (Rev. 13:1–10; 17:3, 9). In a prophetic judgment oracle against the city of Tyre, Isaiah described the city as a whore (Isa. 23:15–18). Tyre was known as a center for commerce and trade, but the prophetic tradition anticipates God's judgment upon it because of its economic exploitation of other nations for its own gain.<sup>25</sup> Tyre is described as seductive and selfish and John alludes to this in describing the whore-city of his day that acted similarly.<sup>26</sup> When the whore-city *topos* is used against the enemies of the prophets it is economic exploitation that is emphasized.<sup>27</sup> In these examples, the female role was played by the enemy city, and the prophet called his listeners to "stay away from the whore!"

For those who caught the allusions to prophetic literature, John criticized Rome for its oppressive violence and economic exploitation. Rome was a whore sitting on a beast; she is "no ordinary harlot."<sup>28</sup> In this way, John exposed "the seamy underside of commerce" for his readers who daily witnessed the arrival of foreign goods and slaves (Rev. 18:11–13).<sup>29</sup>

Davina Lopez enriches our understanding of the

woman/city *topos* through her work with Roman visual art.<sup>30</sup> Since Romans often depicted conquered cities as ravaged women in their art, some version of this *topos* would have been present for at least some of the readers of the book of Revelation. An example of such art was the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias (completed during the reign of Nero) where conquered cities such as Armenia, for instance, were depicted in large decorative statues as women ravaged.<sup>31</sup> Stripped naked and with the threat of sexual and physical violence, Armenia was forced into slavery/prostitution. She was no longer a powerful city/woman; she was a conquered city/whore. For those who had witnessed such art, Rome was the male conqueror of other nations/women. For John, the visual illustration of enemy cities as female slaves meant that even "Babylon the Great" was vulnerable.

### The *Dea Roma* Coin: The Goddess Rome

Twenty-five years before the writing of the book of Revelation, a coin minted in and circulated around the Roman province of Asia depicted Rome as the goddess Roma. In the depiction, she sat on seven hills, with a sword in her left hand, and with her feet touching the river god Tiber. Also on the coin, a she-wolf is represented with two humans suckling her. The imagery is of Rome's mythic founding by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus.<sup>32</sup>

Comparisons between the coin's imagery and the description in Revelation 17 are striking. On the coin, the goddess of Rome sat near water, mistress of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The book of Revelation also described a woman located near water (1, 15), but she was a whore, not a goddess. Both women sat on seven hills

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(9), which was the unmistakable way of referring to the city of Rome in the first century. While Roma the goddess held a sword in her left hand, Rome the whore held a cup;

a cup of “abominations and the impurities of her fornication” (4). Instead of a she-wolf standing near Roma the goddess, Rome the whore sat on a beast that had seven heads and ten horns (3, 7).

If John had this common coin in mind, his description in Revelation 17 unveiled what he saw as the true nature of Roma. Rather than a goddess, she was a whore. The claim of the *Pax Romana* was exposed as expanding the empire through immorality and violence (5–6). Rather than celebrate Roma’s mythic beginnings, John equated her with the arrogant and blaspheming beast that people worshiped in place of God (4–8). This scene reassured the faithful that the whore actually exhibited vulnerability and would soon meet her end in a judgment wrought by God (17).

In the description of her judgment, the whore at last seemed like a typical prostitute. Her body was used, abused, and then discarded. Instead of being wealthy, well dressed, and covered with jewels (4), she was stripped naked (16). Instead of being the oppressor of others (6), she was the victim of violence (16). Rather than intoxicated by blood (6), her blood was shed as she drank God’s judgment against her (17). Rather than a queen with power (18:7), she was “devoured.” This meant there was nothing left to bury, the ultimate shame; she had “no memory marker.”<sup>33</sup> Her fate was the commonly conceived fate of first century prostitutes—no longer beguiling, but gutted.

As Roma the whore was being judged, her true identity was unveiled—for those with eyes to see, her power was fragile. Revelation states that the name on her forehead is “Babylon the Great, mother of whores” (17:5). As readers focused on her forehead, they saw that she was in reality a tattooed slave herself,<sup>34</sup> not the master of sea and land as claimed on the coins. The slave trader was really a slave, propped up by a beast that could, and does, turn on her (17:16).

The coin provides useful background for how some readers might have made sense of the whore image. But there was another, richer possibility. Several decades before the circulation of the coin, the people of Asia Minor

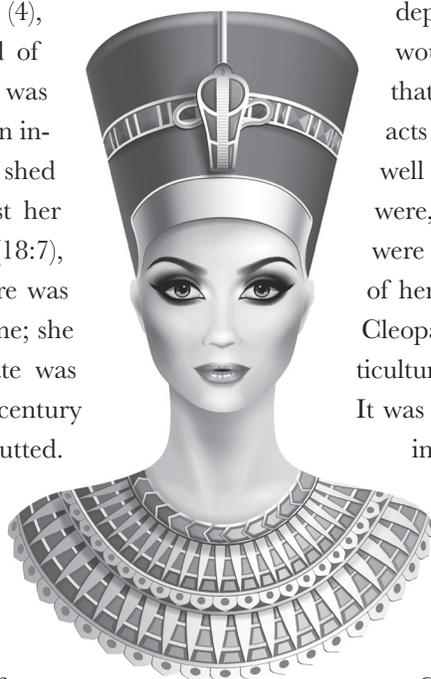
province had seen an actual powerful queen made into a whore by Rome. Although her own people celebrated her as a goddess, she and her nation had been ravished. This background to the whore imagery perhaps resonated even more readily than coins and Hebrew prophetic traditions with the first readers of the book of Revelation. That queen’s involvement in Asia Minor had profoundly shaped its history. Her story indelibly inscribed itself on the cultural memory of the people of that province. In order to have some appreciation of the enormity of her impact on that world, a brief review of her life and legacy is necessary.

### Cleopatra: The Royal Whore

Cleopatra (69–30 BCE) was both a leader and a legend.<sup>35</sup> There are sharp discrepancies between the two—between what is known about the historical person Cleopatra, and how most writers of the past 2,000 years depicted her. Although Roman propaganda would successfully reduce her reputation to that of a powerful seductress, Cleopatra’s acts of brutality and cunning diplomacy, as well as her liaisons with powerful Romans, were, from her own perspective, simply what were necessary to ensure her survival and that of her people. As queen of Egypt (51–30 BCE) Cleopatra VII ruled from her palace in the multicultural city of Alexandria on the Nile Delta. It was a city unparalleled as a center of learning and famous for its extensive library.<sup>36</sup>

Cleopatra saw it as her duty to protect and provide for her people against the overwhelming might of Rome as it swept eastward. Egypt’s vulnerability and sense of powerlessness motivated Cleopatra’s policy. An entire nation depended on her for its future.

Although she was a brilliant, highly educated woman respected by her contemporaries, in the popular mind of the first century CE, Cleopatra was first and foremost associated with sexual promiscuity, an image nurtured by the propaganda. What more did a writer need to do than to narrate Cleopatra’s history of illicit liaisons? She had a child with Gaius Julius Caesar while he was married to another woman, and three children with the already-mar-



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ried Mark Antony.<sup>37</sup> Roman authors described her as intoxicating and seductive, causing Roman men to make poor judgments. The Roman poet Lucan, for example, writing in the first century CE, described her as one who “possesses Egypt and is playing the harlot for Rome.”<sup>38</sup> But in a world where children shared by monarchs provided stability between empires, her behavior was not that of a seductress but of a politically shrewd survivor.<sup>39</sup>

Schiff, and several other recent studies of Cleopatra, have provided correctives to the highly colored propaganda of Roman authors and poets that paraded as history. Michael Grant rediscovers Cleopatra’s leadership abilities prior to Rome’s propaganda war against her. Duane W. Roller’s analysis recovers Cleopatra’s remarkable scholarly, military, and personal achievements.<sup>40</sup> Diana E. E. Kleiner writes of the queen’s lasting impact on the art and architecture of the Roman Empire despite the propaganda against her.<sup>41</sup>

When Cleopatra began to rule the Egyptians as a woman in her late teens, she inherited a huge financial debt owed to Rome by her late father. Furthermore, her country’s wealth and natural resources made it particularly vulnerable to Rome’s expansionist plans.<sup>42</sup> Cleopatra was obliged to rule as her predecessors had done, as a monarch allied with but subservient to Rome. Almost twenty years later, when, in 32 BCE, Octavian declared war on Cleopatra, she “had engaged in no hostilities toward Rome. . . . She had maintained order in her kingdom, supplied Rome when called upon to do so, materialized when summoned, aggressed upon no neighbors.”<sup>43</sup>

The evidence indicates that Cleopatra was “unusually well educated even for a royal woman of the period.”<sup>44</sup> Stimulating intellectuals filled her court, many studying nearby at the famous Alexandrian library. Educated in philosophy, rhetoric, and oratory, she was an accomplished linguist and had mastered the language of her Egyptian

subjects, the first Greek monarch to do so.<sup>45</sup> When Julius Caesar left Alexandria after his almost-one-year liaison with the queen of the Nile, he took with him ideas about calendar reform, Hellenistic governance, public libraries, and building projects that would quickly make their way into Roman society. He would even create a golden statue of Cleopatra in the precinct of his Roman Forum.

After giving birth to Caesar’s son, Cleopatra identified with the deity Isis. Cleopatra maintained this identification throughout her reign, often appearing in public dressed as the goddess. “Isis was the ideal women’s goddess—the guardian of women, marriage, maternity, fertility, and children.”<sup>46</sup> Later, when Roman propaganda depicted Cleopatra as a whore, the epithet clashed violently with the view her Egyptian subjects held of her, as a champion of women and motherhood.

How did this skilled, able “ruler of outstanding ability and experience,”<sup>47</sup> called even by Josephus a woman “of the highest dignity of any of her sex at that time in the world,”<sup>48</sup> become, to use the title of Schiff’s final chapter, “the wickedest woman in history”? In short, Cleopatra became caught up in the last of the Roman civil wars. The wars convulsed Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean and brought an end to the Republic. In this upheaval, she found herself on the losing side.

Cleopatra’s involvement in Roman affairs had been inevitable, given the importance of Egypt. “Egyptian grain could supply Rome for four months of the year.”<sup>49</sup> When it became clear that Octavian and Antony, the ambitious and contending co-leaders of Rome, would not be reconciled, Octavian began a propaganda war against Antony and the queen of Egypt—a war that gained momentum after the Donations of Alexandria in 34 BCE.<sup>50</sup>

This event followed Antony’s minor victory in Armenia and involved a Roman-style Triumph down the streets

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of Alexandria with conquered royalty, captives, and treasures in train. The treasures of Armenia, along with its king, were presented to Cleopatra and her children. Anthony divided the eastern empire among Cleopatra's children, and later, by his decree, she was called the "Queen of Kings, whose sons are Kings."<sup>51</sup>

Octavian, who saw all this as a threat to his own imperial ambitions, made sure that the Roman people did not celebrate this queen's new titles and territories, even if her children did have Roman blood in their veins. In the literary accounts of Rome, the scheming queen had seduced Antony, who now showed more loyalty to her family and land than to his own.<sup>52</sup> Grant points out that "the propaganda that she had ensnared Antony in oriental debauchery, and that this was what kept him away from the active life of a Roman, was a lie."<sup>53</sup> But that did not matter to Rome. As Grant observes, "successful propaganda does not depend on reason, or truth, but thrives on moral, emotional and scandalous issues." For Octavian, "Cleopatra proved a perfect battle-cry."<sup>54</sup>

Roman writers challenged Cleopatra's new authority. When Antony had coins minted with the two of them depicted together, Rome squirmed. "What was a foreign woman doing on a Roman coin?" It was not just that Antony "shared denarii with a woman not his wife. He appeared to be distributing Roman lands to a foreigner."<sup>55</sup> This was a direct challenge to the Roman hegemony that Octavian envisaged; thus, he created and fostered Roman disgust with Cleopatra and then used it for his own political advantage. Octavian charged Antony with aligning himself with an enemy of Rome. Observes Schiff:

It would be difficult to say to whom Cleopatra was more vital in 32 [BCE]: the man to whom she was the partner, or the man to whom she was the pretext. Antony could not win a war without her. Octavian could not wage one.<sup>56</sup>

In the waging of this war, propaganda was one of Octavian's most effective strategies. In the historical narratives of future generations, Cleopatra was ruthless and cunning, "the oriental woman who had ensnared the Roman leader in her evil luxury, the harlot who had seized Roman territories, until even Rome itself was not safe from her degenerate alien hordes."<sup>57</sup> Would she even dare to seat herself upon the seven hills?

After the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, Romans were taught to think of the queen as that whore who had almost cost Rome its empire. As W. W. Tam states:

against Cleopatra was launched one of the most terrible outbursts of hatred in history; no accusation was too vile to be hurled at her; and the charges then made have echoed through the world ever since, and have sometimes been naively taken for facts.<sup>58</sup>

The popular contemporary Roman poet Propertius (50–15 BCE), for example, used the image of Cleopatra as a whore to underscore the dangers of a powerful woman who could bring a man "enslaved under her rule." Propertius devoted no less than three full paragraphs to Cleopatra, paragraphs full of invective. "Truly that whore, queen of incestuous Canopus [a town in Egypt near Alexandria] . . . spread her foul mosquito nets over the Tarpeian Rock [a steep cliff of the Capitoline hill in Ancient Rome]."<sup>59</sup>

By the time the author of Revelation wrote, Roman propaganda against Cleopatra had substituted itself for her actual history and had become embedded in the cultural memory of the empire, particularly in the eastern portion of it.<sup>60</sup> Asia Minor's cultural ties and complex interactions with Antony and Cleopatra meant that the region's history included the stories of the Greek queen of Egypt.

## Cleopatra in the Cultural Memory of Asia Minor

As already noted, first and foremost, Cleopatra and Asia Minor had backed the wrong general in the Roman civil war. The cities of this eastern province had provided hospitality and resources for Antony at various stages of the conflict. In 41 BCE, Antony had arrived in Ephesus, a major port city in Asia Minor, to be greeted as a god by the Ephesians:

Antony now exercised wider control in the east than any Hellenistic ruler since Alexander, so that the divine honors seemed to come to him quite naturally. Besides, he needed to counter Octavian's proclamation that he was the son of a god. So, Antony was not just the son of a god, he was god: Dionysus, the world-conquering provider of happiness and immortality. . . . Ephesian inscriptions, too, proclaimed him God Manifest, son of Ares and Aphrodite (Mars and Venus), savior of all mankind.<sup>61</sup>

Antony then moved further east to the city of Tarsus located in Cilicia, the province bordering Asia. It was from this location that Antony summoned Cleopatra. It was a good political move in order to win over the people of that region. Antony and Cleopatra would meet in lands with a long history of her Hellenistic culture and heritage.<sup>62</sup>

Plutarch's late first-century CE, highly inflated description of Cleopatra's trip to Antony in Tarsus alleged extravagance beyond imagination. Accompanied by over a hundred boats loaded with every conceivable luxury, she arrived on a barge whose stern was made of gold, whose sails were the purple of royalty, and whose oars were silver, "which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes" and other instruments. Cleopatra reclined under "a pavilion of cloth of gold tissue" with painted boys using "little fans in their hands" to keep the queen cool. Perfume filled the air. People ran along the river following the sight. Widespread rumor had it that "the goddess Venus was come to play with the god Bacchus for the general good of all Asia."<sup>63</sup>

Whatever the truth of this first adult encounter between Antony and Cleopatra, it was a memorable event

for the people living in Tarsus. Cleopatra's style was luxurious and lavish. Rome called such luxury obscene. The "Lady of Abundance" was known for her pearls at a time when, "[i]f moral turpitude began with shellfish and metastasized into purple and scarlet robes, it found its ostentatious apogee in pearls." These "topped the extravagance scale in Rome."<sup>64</sup>

For the people of Asia Minor, however, Cleopatra was royalty living in luxury as royalty was expected to live. Her heritage was that of a Ptolemaic queen of Egypt and she shared their Hellenistic culture. Worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis was popular in Asia Minor at this time, and Cleopatra further inspired such worship. She could protect them.<sup>65</sup> In addition, she gave hope for the future to the people living in Asia province.<sup>66</sup>

By the time Cleopatra left Antony in Tarsus and returned to Egypt, she had agreed to provide supplies for Antony's upcoming war with the Parthians. Antony had agreed to have Cleopatra's only remaining rival sibling, Arsinoë, put to death. This was a tricky undertaking, as Arsinoë had taken sanctuary several years earlier in Ephesus at the famous temple to Artemis. Some in Ephesus, given their ties to the Ptolemaic line, had even declared Arsinoë queen of Egypt. Perhaps for that very reason, in 41 BCE Antony had her executed. This event would long stay in the memories of the Ephesians, not only because of their insistence that Antony pardon the priest who had served Arsinoë, but also because of the city's policy that the temple of Artemis was a sacred place of asylum.<sup>67</sup> An unusual octagonal structure in Ephesus has recently been identified by archaeologists as the tomb of Arsinoë, and that perhaps,

Mark Antony intended to conceal Arsinoë's assassination by an honorable burial as far away from her native city as possible. The time frame in which this building was erected as well as the historical circumstances are both indications of the assassinated Ptolemaian princess Arsinoë IV.<sup>68</sup>

Antony and Cleopatra certainly left their mark upon the major cities of Asia Minor. In addition, at least in Roman propaganda, they would be known for what they did not leave. Plutarch recorded that Antony took a collection of 200,000 volumes from the much-revered Pergamum li-

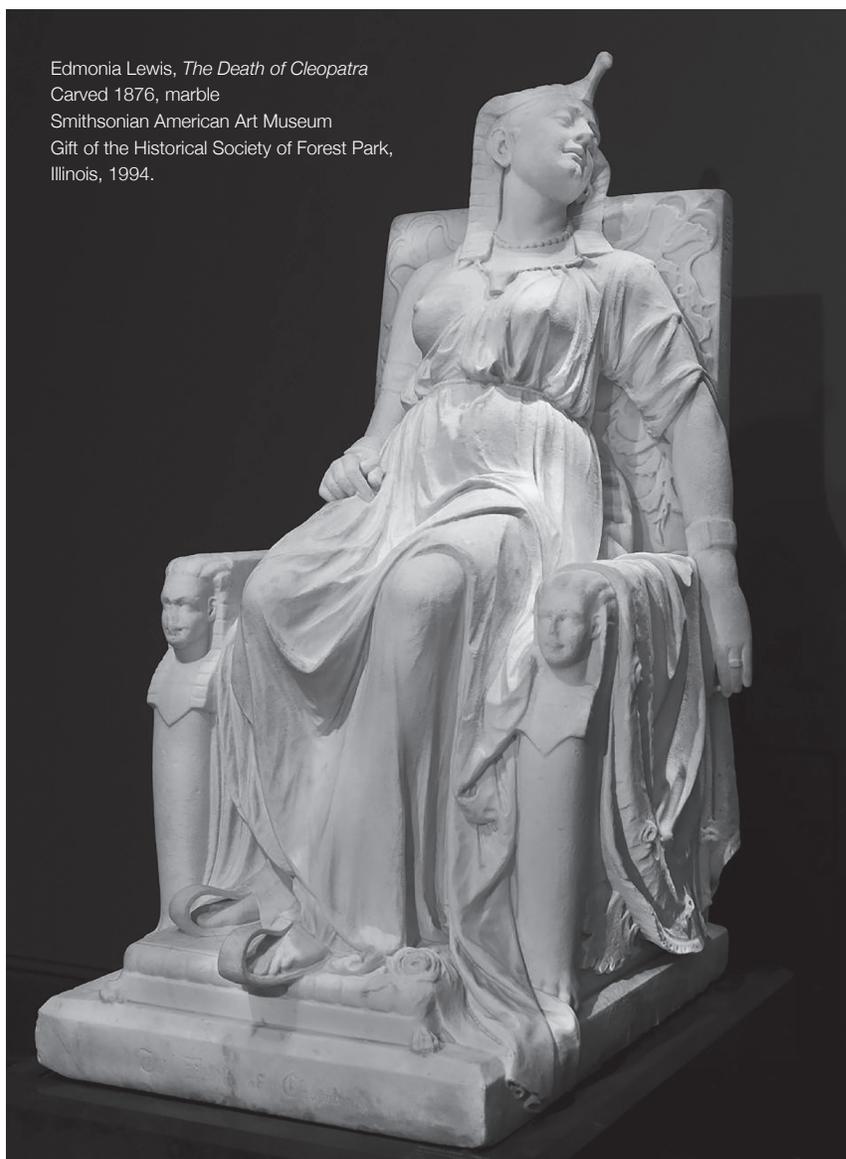
brary, first established under King Eumenes II (197–58 BCE) of the former Kingdom of Pergamum, and gave it to Cleopatra for her library in Alexandria.<sup>69</sup> True or not, the loss enhanced the legend.

Antony and Cleopatra settled in Ephesus for another extended period of time in 33–32 BCE, this time having gathered troops for the showdown with Octavian. The military camps alone provided material for telling stories to Ephesian children for many years to come. The couple “settled for the winter at Ephesus in Asia Minor. Antony’s military prowess and Cleopatra’s treasury still looked to be unbeatable.”<sup>70</sup> Michael Grant notes that:

For the first time since Alexander the Great, the whole sea-power of the near east was in the hands of one man. In addition to 300 merchant vessels, he had 500 warships, of which Cleopatra contributed 200. She also provided enough money and supplies to see his army through a whole campaigning season. Canidius Crassus [a Roman general] had now brought the bulk of it back from Armenia; there were 75,000 legionaries (30 legions), 25,000 light-armed infantry and 12,000 cavalry.<sup>71</sup>

Although sources suggest that Antony thought it best that Cleopatra return to Egypt before the battle began, she stayed in Ephesus encouraging the Egyptian forces in their joint military cause. Crassus supported Cleopatra’s presence, “considering that he could see no king of all the kings [of] their confederates that Cleopatra was inferior unto, either for wisdom or judgment, seeing that long before she had wisely governed so great a realm as Egypt.”<sup>72</sup>

Antony and Cleopatra and their vast armies lost the battle of Actium (September 31 BCE) and suddenly Asia Minor was on the wrong side. After Actium, things dras-



Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*  
Carved 1876, marble  
Smithsonian American Art Museum  
Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park,  
Illinois, 1994.

tically changed in the province. In order to survive in the newly united empire of which they were a part, people living in Ephesus, Pergamum, and other Asian cities had to find ways to express their loyalty to Octavian, now Caesar Augustus. Within two years, the first imperial cult in Asia Minor was established at Pergamum (29 BCE).<sup>73</sup> Smyrna would follow in 26 CE, with a temple dedicated to Tiberius, Augustus, and the Roman Senate. And in 89 CE, Ephesus would create the Temple of the Sebastoi, the temple in honor of the line of Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE). No other province in the empire had more than one imperial cult. By the end of the first century, Asia had three. The imperial cult came to permeate life in Asia, a province desperately needing to be on the side of Augustus and his successors.

# The historical necessity of the imperial cult, as well as the queen-whore imagery, would have resonated with readers in the Asia province as part of their cultural memory of the Greek queen of Egypt.

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The enthusiastic embrace of the imperial cult in Asia accomplished for its cities what Herod the Great accomplished for himself personally. Josephus, writing during the second half of the first century CE, reflected the way the propaganda about Cleopatra had already permeated and was being propagated in much of the empire. Josephus told of the first encounter between Herod and Octavian following the latter's victory at Actium. In Josephus's account, Herod first took off his diadem and then defended his friendship with Antony, arguing that this was appropriate since Antony was his benefactor—the one who had made him king of the Jews. But, he hesitated to tell the new Caesar, he had told Antony to kill Cleopatra, but Antony would not listen. As Antony had made plans to advance on Octavian, Herod had been called away to defend his own territory against Arabia. He wanted Caesar to know that he had not been standing at Antony's side at Actium.<sup>74</sup> Josephus's Caesar responded by replacing Herod's diadem and saying: "Antony has done well in preferring Cleopatra to you; for by this means we have gained you by her madness."<sup>75</sup> They then began to feast together.

To underscore his loyalty, Herod made himself Cleopatra's enemy. The province of Asia Minor, the former territory of Antony and Cleopatra, was forced to give its loyalty to Caesar Augustus. In doing so, Asia also distanced itself from Cleopatra. Worship of Isis, goddess of Egypt, was out.<sup>76</sup> Worship of the emperor was in.

## Cultural Memory and Revelation 17

By the time John wrote the book of Revelation to fol-

lowers of Jesus living in the major cities of Asia Minor, the imperial cult had been flourishing for several generations. All people were expected to participate in the cult, including frequent city festivals, games, and sporting events. Commerce and trade were associated with the cult through local trade guilds, and Asia was flourishing in its cooperation with the Roman Empire. Asia's exports were similar to those listed by John in his description of the goods traded by "Babylon" later in the book of Revelation.<sup>77</sup> In addition, worship of the emperors took place in a myriad of contexts. Emperors were worshipped in their own temples, at temples of other gods, in theaters, in gymnasias, in stoas, in basilicas, in judicial settings, in private homes and elsewhere. Imperial cults were everywhere.<sup>78</sup>

John called his readers to refuse to participate in the cult, including the daily activities of the marketplaces, trade guilds, and shrines. To make his strongest rhetorical point, John portrayed Rome as a queen-whore. His readers were admonished to avoid all involvement in the imperial cult, including participating in commerce. Followers of Jesus were not to be seduced by the whore's luxuries, but to resist her economic exploits and violence. The ἀποκάλυψις was that the powerful queen was really a powerless πόρνη. It was just a matter of time, and she would be defeated. They must not go down with her. John believed that Christians in the province of Asia Minor were in a crisis.<sup>79</sup> "The crisis addressed in Revelation is primarily an ideological conflict, arising from the author's utter rejection of the claims of the Roman Empire to power and authority."<sup>80</sup> Christians must resist.

The way apocalyptic literature functions "is to shape

one's imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts."<sup>81</sup> How might the whore imagery of Revelation 17 have shaped readers' imaginations and therefore their actions?

The historical necessity of the imperial cult, as well as the queen-whore imagery, would have resonated with readers in the Asia province as part of their cultural memory of the Greek queen of Egypt who had spent two of her last three years living in their region. Stories and physical landmarks remained. And the queen-whore's great city of Alexandria still flourished just 400 miles to the south. But who was the whore . . . really? Rome had resisted the whore, even if Antony and Asia had not. Rome had killed her: a woman of power made into a whore in Roman poetry and legend. For John, however, *Rome* was the whore to be resisted. Would such a shift have jarred John's first readers? Might some have welcomed it?

Wolfgang Iser argues that the experience of reading means that text and reader converge. This is possible through what he calls the "repertoire" of the text. He says,

The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged. In the literary text they thus become capable of new connections, but at the same time the old connections are still present, at least to a certain degree.<sup>82</sup>

The meaning of πόρνη as a vulnerable slave working the streets was "familiar territory" but required "new connections" when John's work included πόρνη who was also a queen. For some readers, the Hebrew prophetic literary tradition, associating cities with female whores representing idolatry and economic exploitation, was "familiar territory." For other readers, statues in various locations of the empire depicting conquered nations as ravished women added visual images to the "familiar territory." For still others, the *Dea Roma* coin provided "familiar territory" and gave meaning to Revelation 17.

But another rich source of "familiar territory" is the legend of Cleopatra. Some readers would have drawn upon this culturally embedded story of the queen-whore of Roman propaganda which would also have given

meaning to the queen-whore of the Apocalypse. The story began with the arrival of a new god, Dionysus, his companion carried on a golden barge, and the union that gave hope to the peoples of the east. The story also included the great temple to Artemis, the famous asylum that failed to save the Greek queen Arsinoë. This strand of the story explained her unique tomb, a landmark reminder of the Cleopatra legend in the city of Ephesus. The story also told of the great library of Pergamum whose loss was lamented for generations. In Ephesus, the story included great military camps and hundreds of ships that were lost forever. Throughout Asia, every temple and shrine and religious site for the imperial cult recalled Cleopatra's story and the time when, like the Jewish Herod, the province proved its loyalty to Augustus by distancing itself from the last Ptolemaic queen of Egypt.

This paper proposes that the culturally embedded story of Cleopatra provided part of the book of Revelation's "repertoire," creating meaning as readers imagined the text's queen-πόρνη. Who else could play the part so well in this description of a whore whose sexual promiscuity, powerful liaisons, intoxicating femininity, and seductive ways made her extremely dangerous? "That Cleopatra was the most powerful woman in the ancient world's first century CE cannot be contested."<sup>83</sup> By John's day, Rome's view of Cleopatra had been well established: Cleopatra was a lover of luxury, and a ruthless woman who had blood on her hands.<sup>84</sup>

John took familiar imagery created by Rome's literary history and used it for his own purposes.<sup>85</sup> He turned it against Rome, unveiling the way Rome itself worked. The Roman Empire was the "great whore," "with whom the kings of the earth have whored" (17:1–2). Rome wore "purple and scarlet," and was "bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls" (4). Cleopatra's golden cups may have held potions and poisons, but Rome held a cup "full of abominations and impurities" (4). Cleopatra might have been acclaimed as the "Mother of Kings," and to Rome, the mother of "bastard children," but for John, Rome was "Babylon the great, mother of whores" (5). She was responsible for the blood of thousands, "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" (15). John used familiar imagery created to invoke Rome's enemy, but then turned it on Rome itself. In Rome "was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain

on earth” (18:24). After Cleopatra’s suicide, Rome celebrated. The enemy queen was no more. John’s audience would celebrate when Rome was no more. The figure of Cleopatra as an interpretive key to the imagery of Revelation 17 enriches and broadens the understanding of this important section of the Apocalypse.

## Conclusion

Israel’s prophetic literary tradition, Roman statues of conquered nations, and Roman coins depicting the goddess Roma, provide important historical contexts with which to read Revelation 17. However, the legends surrounding Cleopatra supply the author of Revelation with his most powerful rhetorical resource for critiquing the Roman Empire, especially for those living in Asia Minor. Given this cultural backdrop, we can better appreciate how the imagery of the queen-whore might have gripped first-century readers and hearers of the Apocalypse. This paper argues that in John’s use of the imagery, a particular woman would have come to mind.

Of course, this reading raises questions. This reading acknowledges that John’s rhetoric works only by reinforcing Roman propaganda about Cleopatra and therefore calls for a reading against the text.<sup>86</sup> Readers must resist texts that reduce any woman’s story to whore, even as they celebrate the end of an unjust system where women are forced to play the prostitute in order to survive. How can readers resist both the seductive allure of the whore and the seductive allure of the violence that marks her end?<sup>87</sup> Such questions require further reflection beyond the scope of this paper.

For the Christian readers of the Apocalypse, Chapter 17 left no doubt as to whom the whore referred: “The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). At the end of the first century, that city was Rome. And the writer was convinced that Rome was doomed. This was a highly effective rhetorical device. Here was a text that used Rome’s own hatred-filled literary history against Rome. John moved his readers from historical allusions of Rome’s destruction of its enemy, Cleopatra, to the destruction of Rome, the system that sanctioned the slave trade, brothels, and humans as commodities. Christians must not be seduced by Rome.

Contemporary preaching seeking to interpret Revelation 17 can do so in a more informed way. Christians must

resist contemporary manifestations of both the whore and the whore-like empire that silenced her. For John, the destruction of Rome’s system was as sure as Cleopatra’s demise. The book of Revelation continues to call its readers to faithful living and steadfast resistance to Babylon.

## Endnotes

1. Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore, “How Typical a Roman Prostitute Is Revelation’s ‘Great Whore?’”, *JBL* 130, no. 3 (2011): 551–69, suggest the picture is typical.

2. After the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, Jewish literature referred to Rome as “Babylon.” See Rev. 17:5, 18, and Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch 35–40. For this and other reasons, the majority of scholars place the writing of the book of Revelation at the end of the first century, probably at the end of the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE).

3. I show the repeated use of πόρνη and πορνεία in the description by repeating forms of the English “whore” and “whoring.”

4. Leslie Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 175–219, in a section called “The *Hetaira* and the *Porne*.” After making a similar distinction, Rebecca Flemming, “*Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit*: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution in the Roman Empire,” *JRS* 89 (1999): 38–61, uses the Latin word *meretrix* (from *mereo*, “a woman who earns”) throughout much of her essay. Such women were contrasted with the *matrona*, the respectable wife of a Roman citizen. See also Laura K. McClure, “Introduction” in *Prostitutes & Courtesans in the Ancient World*, edited by Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 3–18.

5. Flemming, “*Quae Corpore*,” 46; “By and large prostitution forms part of the slave economy, so though the labour is hers the profits are not” (50).

6. Kurke, *Coins, Bodies*, 181–82, considers prostitution and the emergence of the coinage economy. A πόρνη was like the coin itself: interchangeable, indiscriminate, and public.

7. David E. Aune, in *Revelation 17–22*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 906–12, uses the word “perplexed” rather than “marveled,” suggesting the puzzlement of the seer.

8. Fantine’s story is narrated in a section of Victor Hugo’s novel aptly called, “The Descent.” Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. by Julie Rose (New York: Modern Library, 2009; French original, 1862), 158. See also pages 134–67.

9. Flemming, “*Quae Corpore*,” 47. Kurke doubts that the equal social status between the *εταίρα* and her male partner was ever more than fantasy. Kurke shows the fluidity of the terms in Greek art. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?,” 557, also challenge the historical accuracy of the courtesan literary tradition.

10. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?,” 555: “She is πόρνη, in John’s discourse of contempt, because she has had many sexual partners, and she has had many sexual partners because she is a πόρνη.”

11. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?,” 562: “What the paradoxical figure of Babylon would have evoked for first-cen-

tury audiences, we would argue, is not the social type of the brothel slave, pure and simple, nor yet the literary topos of the courtesan, pure and simple—although in contrast to most previous scholarship we would see her as closer to the former than to the latter.”

12. Flemming, “*Quae Corpore*,” 41: “the basic premise that prostitutes broadly become such through enslavement (or, at least, that the great majority of prostitutes are slaves) is certainly borne out in numerous sources.”

13. Sandra R. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152: “The essential definition of the slave as property, at the disposal of the slave owner and the owner’s power over the slave trumped all the slave’s human relations.”

14. Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 10.

15. See the helpful discussions subtitled “Body Count,” “Bodies without Boundaries,” and “Surrogate Bodies” in Glancy, *Slavery*, 10–16. See also, Joshel, *Slavery*, 38–41, 151–52. K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) discusses the abuse of slaves’ bodies—both male and female—for economic motives. See especially “Fear, Abuse, and Violence,” 113–37.

16. Flemming, “*Quae Corpore*,” 56.

17. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?,” 558. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 381, illustrates the typical attitude to a prostitute.

18. Glancy, *Slavery*, 54. Flemming, in “*Quae Corpore*,” 53, discusses this as the “no prostituatur” covenant regarding the sale of slaves. Joshel, in *Slavery*, 71, notes that Emperor Hadrian (117–38 CE) put limits on the sale of female slaves for prostitution.

19. Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?” 556–57.

20. This leads Glancy and Moore, “How Typical?,” 562–69, to their conclusion concerning Tacitus’s construction of Valeria Messalina, who, precisely because she was an atypical “whore-empress,” might be the person John was alluding to in the book of Revelation. See Tacitus, *Ann.* 11.1–4, 12, 26–38 and Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.115–32, along with Sandra R. Joshel, “Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus’s Messalina” in *Roman Sexualities*, edited by Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 221–54. While I agree with Glancy and Moore that “John’s characterization of Babylon as πόρνη, both participates in and disrupts this pattern of discourse” (564), I believe the evidence suggests a different historical figure fictionally portrayed in Roman literature.

21. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, New Testament Message 22 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 118. See also, Yarbro Collins, “Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation,” *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (1993): 26.

22. Jeremiah 50:12–13, NRSV. For judgment oracles against Babylon, see Isa. 13:1–14:23; Isa. 47; and Jer. 50–51. For judgment oracles against Tyre, see Isa. 23 and Ez. 26–28.

23. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Babylon the Great: A

Rhetorical-Political Reading of Revelation 17–18” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, edited by David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 243–69, citing 261. The metaphorical use of immorality/idolatry can be seen in Rev. 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2.

24. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 345–46.

25. *Ibid.*, 346: “Tyre’s commercial enterprise is compared with prostitution because it is association [*sic*] with other nations for the sake of profit. Thus we should expect the primary significance of John’s portrayal of Rome as the great harlot to be economic.”

26. Ezekiel’s judgment oracle against Tyre included its claim to be god (Ezek. 28:2, 9). Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 348, and others would suggest that John’s critique of Rome includes the imperial cult.

27. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Babylon the Great,” 262, agrees: “The conventional use of ‘practicing immorality’ as signifying idolatry is here redefined as political ‘intercourse’ that negotiates wealth, power and violent death.”

28. Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 347.

29. Craig R. Koester, “Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18,” *CBQ* 70 (2008): 766–86.

30. Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008). See especially “The Fate of the Nations in Roman Imperial Representation,” 26–55.

31. Geraldine Thommen “The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias: An Imperial Cult to Honor Augustus and the Julio-Claudian Emperors,” *Chronika* 2, [Online Graduate Student Journal, Institute for European and Mediterranean Archaeology, 2012]: 82–91. Thommen includes a picture of ravaged Armenia from the Sebasteion (88). Available from <http://www.chronikajournal.com/resources/ChronikaVolume2.pdf>.

32. Aune discusses this coin in *Revelation 17–22*, 920–23. Flemming, “*Quae Corpore*,” 47, briefly discusses the word *lupa* for she-wolf, which is also a Latin slang word for prostitute.

33. Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 61–62, uses the phrase “There is no memorial marker” to refer to both the whore and the rulers of the world (Rev. 19:17–21).

34. C. P. Jones, “*Stigma*: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *JRS* 77 (1987): 151, calls her “a whore of the most degraded kind, a tattooed slave.”

35. In her recent biography of Cleopatra, Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), considers both aspects.

36. Michael Grant, *Cleopatra* (Edison: Castle Books, 2004 reprint of 1972 original), 181, calls Alexandria “a cultural centre without equal in the Mediterranean world.” Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33, agrees.

37. Cleopatra became pregnant with Antony’s twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene, while he was married to Fulvia. Cleopatra gave birth to their third child, Ptolemy Philadelphus, when Antony was married to Octavian’s sister, Octavia.

38. Lucan, *Bellum Civile* X.36 1–62.
39. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995 reprint of 1975 original), 124, states: “the phenomenon of Cleopatra must be set firmly in the context of Ptolemaic queens, shrewd, able, and ambitious. She was not a courtesan, an exotic plaything for Roman generals. Rather, Cleopatra’s liaisons with the Romans must be considered to have been, from her viewpoint, legitimate dynastic alliances with promises of the greatest possible success and profit to the queen and to Egypt.” Pomeroy also states of Cleopatra that her “competence as a ruler was never questioned, and Egypt remained loyal to her” (187).
40. Roller, *Cleopatra*, 103–28.
41. Diana E. E. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005).
42. Roller, *Cleopatra*, 56, asserts that “she was determined to do better” than her father in resolving the difficulties with Rome. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 78, states: “What the young queen undertook was the quintessential balancing act. Cleopatra apparently resolved to continue an association with Rome that would support the superpower’s expansionist aspirations while allowing Egypt to maintain a strong and independent national identity.”
43. Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 258.
44. *Ibid.*, 43.
45. Roller, *Cleopatra*, 123–28.
46. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 166; Roller, *Cleopatra*, 114–15. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 118–19, describes Isis as: “Sweetly thoughtful, graciously sympathetic, paradoxically both sexual and pure, she taught women how to find pardon and peace.”
47. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 237.
48. Josephus, *A.Ĵ.* XV.4.2.101.
49. Roller, *Cleopatra*, 104–05.
50. *Ibid.*, 130: “These attacks and carefully laid rumors were the basis for the negative tradition about Cleopatra that found literary expression in the writers of the Augustan era and which has pervaded the popular view of the queen ever since.”
51. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 161–71; Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 231–35.
52. Plutarch, *Antonius*, 26, a contemporary of the author of the book of Revelation, said that the donations “greatly offended the Romans and made them much to dislike it, when they saw that for Cleopatra’s sake he deprived his country of her due honor and glory, only to gratify the Egyptians.”
53. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 156. Plutarch, *Ant.* 13.1, introduced Cleopatra as one “who did waken and stir up many vices yet hidden in him, and were never seen to any; and if any spark of goodness or hope of rising were left him, Cleopatra quenched it straight and made it worse than before.” Josephus, *B.Ĵ.* 1.12.5, also a contemporary of the author of Revelation, said Antony was “in love with Cleopatra to the degree of slavery.”
54. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 190. See also Plutarch, *Antonius*, 33: “Now after Caesar had made sufficient preparation, he proclaimed open war against Cleopatra, and made the people to abolish the power and empire of Antonius, because he had before given it up unto a woman.”
55. Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 235. For an English translation of the coins, see Grant, *Cleopatra*, 168–69.
56. Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 260.
57. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 201. Grant also notes: “Cleopatra’s enemies also developed the idea that she was a harlot. Such an interpretation came easily to Romans who regarded sensuality as typically Greek.” (178). Plutarch, *Antonius*, 21, would refer to Cleopatra’s “sweet poison of her love” over Antony so “that he had no other thought but of her.”
58. W. W. Tarn and M. P. Charlesworth, *Octavian, Antony and Cleopatra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 122.
59. *Elegy* by Propertius IU.11:1–72.
60. The poetry of the poet Propertius (50–15 BCE) and other literary forms of propaganda about the queen-whore of Egypt by Lucan (39–65 CE), Josephus (37–100 CE), and Plutarch (46–119 CE) would have been written by the time John wrote the book of Revelation (96 CE). Josephus wrote *Bellum judaicum* in 75 CE and *Antiquitates judaicae* in 94 CE, though *Contra Apionem* was not written until 97 CE. Plutarch’s *Antonius* is considered late first century. These works clearly show that Cleopatra was available in the literary imagination as a figure for John’s “great whore.” Given what we now know about Cleopatra from Roman propaganda, there are echoes aplenty. As the “great whore” she was the “mother of whores” (Rev. 17:1, 5), with control of waterways and therefore people (1). Kings of the earth had been seduced by her and had shared her wine (2). She was arrayed in “purple and scarlet,” with “gold and jewels and pearls” (4). Her hand had held many golden cups (4) full of her love poisons. Her partners in sexual immorality and drunkenness had turned on her and had utterly destroyed her (16), and the gods had willed her overthrow in the restoration of Rome by Octavian (17).
61. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 110–11. See also, Plutarch, *Antonius*, 12.
62. Christine M. Thomas, “At Home in the City of Artemis: Religion in Ephesus in the Literary Imagination of the Roman Period,” in *Ephesus: Metropolis of Asia*, edited by Helmut Koester, HTS (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), 81–117, argues for the dominance of Greek cultural values in this region even after the Roman conquest.
63. See Plutarch, *Antonius*, 13.
64. Schiff, *Cleopatra*, 96, 121. Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, X.142, describes Cleopatra’s extravagance by saying she was “weighed down by her ornaments.”
65. Collins, “Feminine Symbolism,” 20–33, states that the female metaphor “may reflect an ancient Near Eastern understanding of goddesses as protectors of particular peoples or cities. This protective goddess, often called the Fortune of the city, was usually portrayed with a crown that looked like a city wall” (26).
66. W. W. Tarn believes that a document he identifies as the *despoina*-prophecy reflected the hopes of the Hellenists for a child who would bring together East and West and usher in an age of peace and reconciliation. Given his dating of the materials, Tarn thinks that the best interpretation of the child is the son Alexander Helios, born to Antony and Cleopatra. Vergil would apply the prophecy to Octavian, making Augustus the

leader of the new era. See “Alexander Helios and the Golden Age,” *JRS* 22, no. 2 (1932): 136–60.

67. Thomas, “At Home,” 98, states: “One aspect of the temple captured the imagination of Roman-period writers more than any other: the inviolability of the sanctuary.” And also: “Widespread knowledge of the asylum offered by Artemis served the fame and prosperity of the city, attracting a number of wealthy and important figures, many of them aristocratic political refugees” (106).

68. Hilke Thur, “The Processional Way in Ephesus as a Place of Cult and Burial,” in *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia*, edited by Helmut Koester, HTS (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), 157–99, citing 182. See also Peter Scherrer, “The City of Ephesos from the Roman Period to Late Antiquity,” also in *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia*, 1–25: “an octagonal structure adjacent to the Tomb of Androklos is now identified as having been built for Arsinoë IV, the sister of Cleopatra VII” (6).

69. Plutarch, *Antonius*, 33.

70. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 112.

71. Grant, *Cleopatra*, 193–94.

72. Plutarch, *Antonius*, 31. Plutarch says that Crassus spoke such words because he was bribed.

73. Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 32, states: “Asia’s first provincial cult was forged in 29 BCE in the aftermath of major struggles for control over the Mediterranean world. Asia had backed the wrong general (Antony) and then needed to affirm its support of the new ruler (Octavian). The unusual aspects of the arrangement . . . are the result of efforts to negotiate differences in cultic systems because of changing political realities. . . . [T]he cult in Asia . . . became the starting point for an expanding phenomenon of provincial imperial worship throughout the empire.”

74. Josephus, *B.J.* I.20.1.388–90.

75. *Ibid.*, 391.

76. Although Augustus prevented the building of temples to Isis in the city of Rome after 28 BCE, it seems that the Isis cult went out of favor in Asia following the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra. Yarbro Collins, “Feminine Symbolism,” 24, sees similarities between the woman of Rev. 12:1–6 and the Egyptian goddess Isis. If Yarbro Collins is right, John may have been incorporating myths that were still part of the religious consciousness of the people of Asia Minor, even if such beliefs had been forced underground.

77. Arguing that John’s primary audience was made up of Christians in Asia Minor who were involved in commerce, Kirsi Siitonen, “Merchants and Commerce in the Book of Revelation,” in *Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, edited by Michael Labahn and Outi Lehtipuu (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 154, notices: “John’s list includes the main export products of the province of Asia: different textiles, wine, oil, marble, gold, silver, iron and emeralds.” See Rev. 18:11–14.

78. Steven Friesen, “Satan’s Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation,” *JSNVT* 27, no. 3 (2005): 363. See also Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 23–131.

79. Interestingly, 4 Ezra 15:46–49 refers to Asia as “Babylon” and includes whore imagery to depict its idolatry. The author of 4 Ezra wrote after 70 CE and was probably a contemporary of the author of the book of Revelation.

80. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed., The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 273.

81. *Ibid.*, 42.

82. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 69.

83. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 16.

84. Cleopatra’s visits to Tarsus (41 BCE) and Ephesus (32 BCE), and her tour of Herod’s kingdom (36 BCE) accompanied by her fleets and her vast throng of retainers, were all more recent to John’s readers than even the Civil War is to current American readers. The apostle Paul’s grandfather, if in Tarsus at the time, may well have witnessed the queen’s celebrated visit to that city. It is not difficult to imagine that the grandparents of the author of the Apocalypse recalled her stay in Ephesus.

85. In her work on Revelation 12 (the woman-mother and child) and the combat myth in Revelation, Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, HDR 9 (Missoula: Scholar Press, 1976), 188, argues that the “Apollo myths and cult were made to function as political propaganda for the empire,” but the author of Revelation co-opted the Roman propaganda and used the myth for the Messiah figure over and against Rome. I am suggesting a similar rhetorical strategy by the author in the use of the Cleopatra legend created by Roman propaganda. The enemy of Rome (Cleopatra as whore) becomes Rome as enemy (Rome as whore). See also Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 245. Part of the genius of the imagery of apocalyptic literature is its ability to hold multiple layers of meaning.

86. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Babylon the Great,” uses the phrase “read against the grain” in her rhetorical-political interpretation of Revelation 17.

87. Here I join many who wrestle with such questions and the book of Revelation, including Greg Carey, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, edited by David L. Barr (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 169–80.



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